

Thursday 30th July 2020

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

*How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!*

'Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'"

Romans 11:33-34

If someone learned their history exclusively from the Bible, they would come away with a notion that history could be divided neatly into two sections: one Old Testament world before Jesus and another New Testament world after Jesus' birth and death. That is how the Bible is divided and, in the Western world, our calendar reinforces that with BC/AD (or BCE/CE). The danger of such a view, however, is that we interpret the four Gospels from a "New Testament" perspective and forget that all of the people described in the Gospel were still very much living with an "Old Testament" mind-set. They didn't know what was going to happen.

Instead of thinking of the disciples as the first Christians, we should realise that they were Jews and viewed Jesus in the light of Jewish (Old Testament) scripture. Jesus places himself in that context when he says during the Sermon on the Mount *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."* (Matt. 5:17).

Furthermore, these were people whose attitudes had been shaped by repeated invasion and repression over the previous 800 years and whose land was now again under military rule, this time at the hands of the Romans. During those 800 years, the idea of a Messiah had formed – a descendant of the line of David who would gather the Jews together into a new kingdom. This idea grew in strength over time and was firmly established when Jesus began his ministry. There had been many who falsely claimed to be the Messiah. Some thought that John the Baptist was the Messiah and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem asked him if he was (John 1:19-28). He denies this but rather, when he sees Jesus coming towards him shortly afterwards, points out Jesus as *"God's chosen one"* (v.34).

In the Gospel of Mark (8:29), Peter recognises Jesus as the Messiah. The Romans also recognised Jesus was being acclaimed as the anticipated Jewish Messiah. He had ridden into Jerusalem as king and the crowds had chanted *"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"* (Mark 11:10). Shortly afterwards, the charge under which Jesus was tried (and which was affixed to the cross on which the Romans crucified him as a common criminal) was that he had claimed to be *"King of the Jews"*.

So, what was the message this Messiah brought? Everyone was looking for a leader to rise up, overthrow the oppressors and establish a new Jewish kingdom. So what was his rallying cry?

Well, like John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2), Jesus also proclaimed that *"the kingdom of God is near"*. But how that was to be achieved was utterly revolutionary; and what he said not only flew in the face of those like the Zealots who were looking for armed uprising but also, with his radical re-interpretation of Jewish scripture, placed him in direct opposition to the Pharisees, the experts in the Jewish faith and tradition at that time.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matt. 5:5)

"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." (Matt. 5:39)

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matt 5:44)

But if that message was unexpected, then the death of this Jewish Messiah at Roman hands, just two or three years into his ministry was even more unpredictable, particularly to those who knew him best. Today, we can look back and trace an inexorable thread of continuity running through Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. As a consequence, we sometimes begin to take that sequence of events for granted. But, in doing so, we lose sight of the fact that none of Jesus' disciples would have anticipated his death, especially so soon after his triumphant arrival into Jerusalem. These were the people closest to him, his constant traveling companions and yet, despite his teachings, none of them had truly grasped what was happening, what would have to happen.

We now understand better what was happening then and why; hindsight allows us to detect how God works through history more clearly than is possible for those living through such events; and we have both God's Word and the gift of the Holy Spirit to advise and guide us in our search.

Nonetheless, thinking that we can know the mind of God or confidently predict what he will do is simply an act of vanity and foolishness on our part.

Should we then despair of our lack of understanding? Certainly not. Instead, we should rejoice that we are in the hands of a God who is infinitely wiser than we are. There is no passage in the Bible that encapsulates this better than Isaiah 40, for me one of the most comforting and inspiring passages in all of scripture. Read this now and marvel not only at what Paul later called the "*depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God*" but also how God is ultimately faithful to those who place their hope in him.